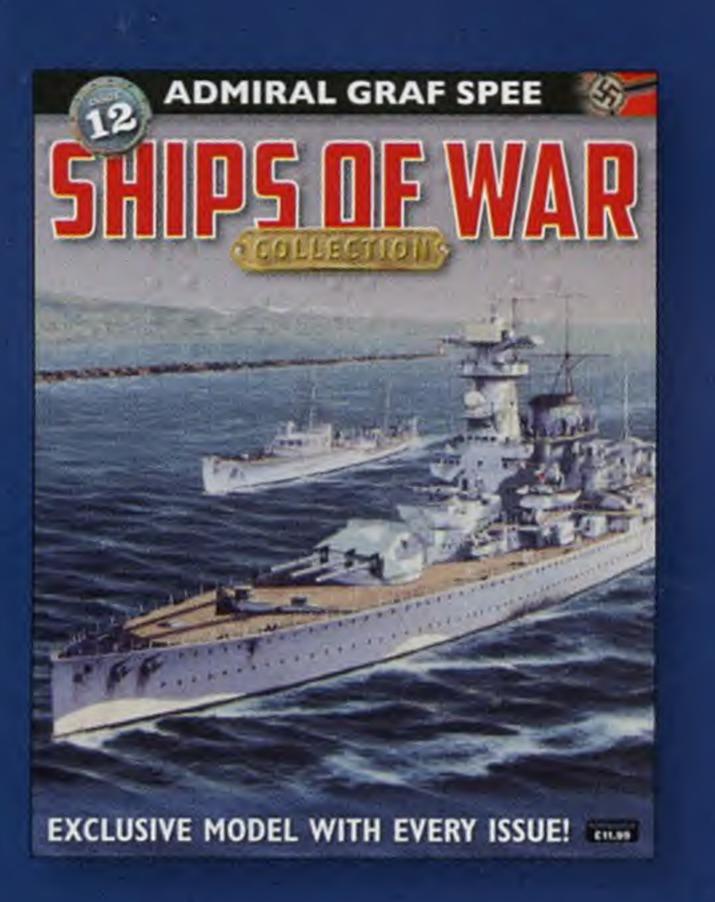




### NEXT ISSUE ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE



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#### PUBLISHING

Publisher: Amercom SA Printing: Druk Intro SA ISSN 2059-1039

#### **UK SUBSCRIPTIONS**

Data Base Factory Contact Phone Number: 0344 493 6080 www.shipsofwar.com.

#### **UK DISTRIBUTION**

Marketforce (UK) Ltd 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf London, E14 5HU Contact phone number: 0203 787 9001

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The only modern battleships fielded by the Regia Marina (Italian Navy) during World War 2 all belonged to the Littorio class. Displacing more than 40,000 tons, armed with nine 15in (381mm) main battery guns and capable of speeds in excess of 30kts, they potentially posed a real threat to the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean once Italy entered the war alongside Germany in June 1940. Of the Littorio class battleships, it was the *Vittorio Veneto* that saw the most action.

UNLIKE MOST OF the signatories of the Washington Naval Treaty of February 1922, which aimed to limit the displacement and weaponry of future battleships, Italy was well under its maximum battleship tonnage allowance at the end of World War 1. Indeed, possessing just five vessels of this type, it was not required to scrap any of its existing battleships and was allowed to build up its tonnage. However, as its primary rival in the region, France, made no attempt to increase its force of battleships (it too was well under the tonnage cap), the Italians instead chose to spend their limited naval construction budget on the building of heavy cruisers throughout the 1920s.

Nevertheless, following reports that the French had commenced construction of battleships, the Italian Admiralty instructed the Naval Construction Office to draw up plans for three 23,000-ton ships armed with 15in guns. A follow-on design increased the armament to 16in batteries. Three vessels was the preferred number as it would allow the Regia Marina to keep at least two ships operational at any one time. As the vessels would be operating in the confined waters of the Mediterranean, the Italian designers were instructed to sacrifice armoured protection and range for armament and speed.

In 1932, the first of two 26,500-ton Dunkerque-class battleships armed with 13in guns was laid down in

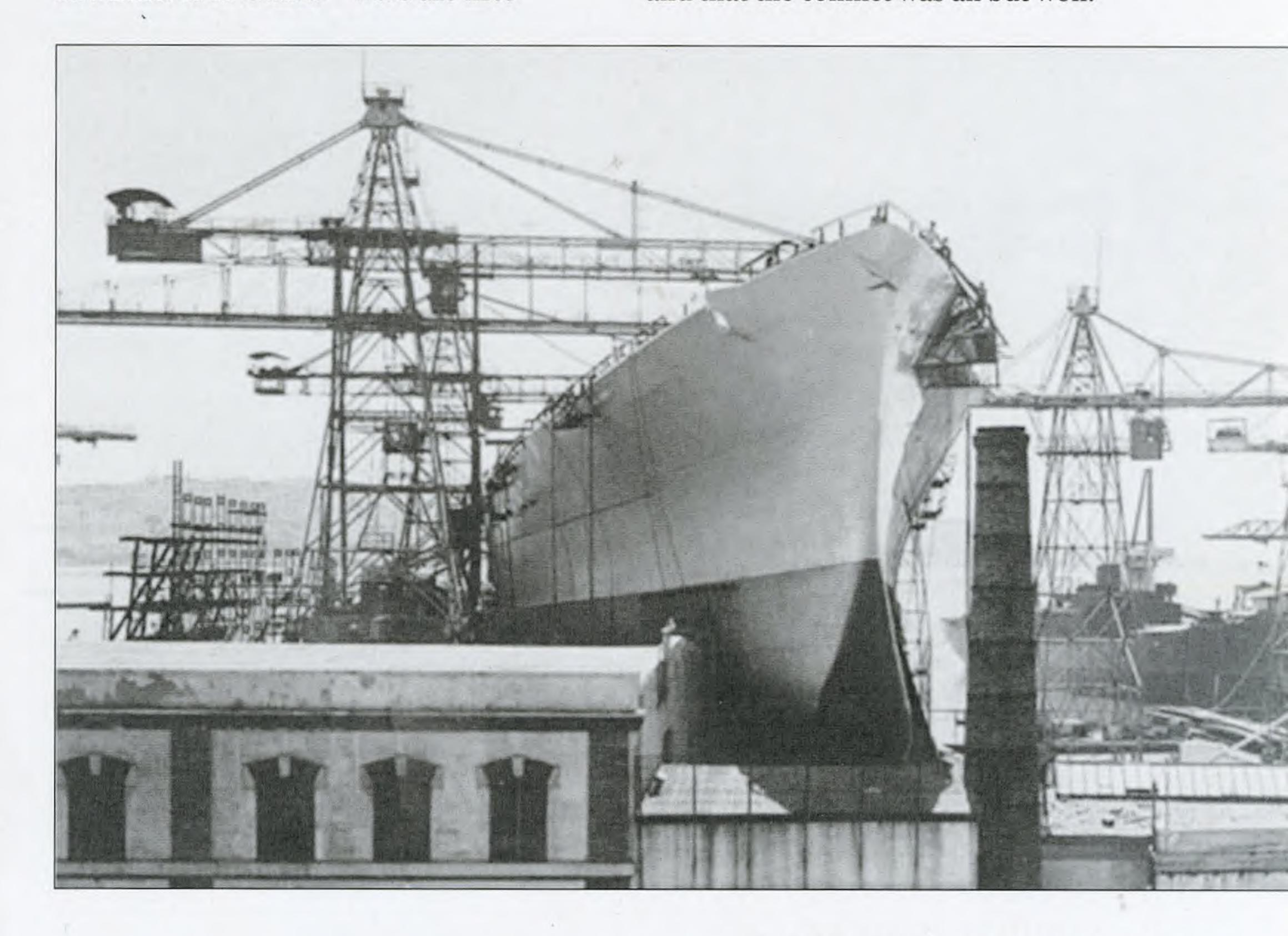
Right: With its keel laid on 28 October 1934, Vittorio Veneto was launched on 25 July 1937 and finally commissioned on 2 August 1940.

France, to which Germany responded by commencing construction of two Scharnhorst-class battlecruisers and the Italians began design work on what would become the Littorio class.

On 28 October 1934, which was the 12th anniversary of the fascist march on Rome (which brought Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's Nationalist Fascists Party to power), keel-laying ceremonies were held at the Cantieri Riuniti dell'Adriatico shipyard in Trieste and the Ansaldo shipyard in Genoa for the first Italian battleships to be built since World War 1. These ships – *Vittorio Veneto* in Trieste and *Littorio* in Genoa – were the first

two units of the Littorio class. Four years later, and no longer bound by any treaty obligations to restrict naval construction, the Italians laid down two additional battleships – *Roma* and *Imperio*. Although the system of naval treaties between the wars had, as planned, dramatically affected the growth of capital ships during this period, the poor economic state in which Italy found itself in for much of this time meant that the Regia Marina had suffered very little as it could not have afforded to build battleships in any case.

With Mussolini's expansionist plans increasingly coming to the fore during the 1930s, more money was made available to the military. Although aircraft, tanks and artillery pieces could be constructed relatively quickly, warships, and in particular capital ships, could not. This meant that the Regia Marina was far from ready when Italy entered World War 2 in June 1940 by declaring war on France and Great Britain. This did not matter to Mussolini, as he believed that he had wisely gone to war on the winning side, and that the conflict was all but won.



# Emio service

ORDERED AS PART OF the 1934 construction programme, the first new battleship was named after the Battle of Vittorio Veneto fought at the very end of World War 1. Work commenced on the ship's keel at the Cantieri Riuniti dell'Adriatico shipyard in Trieste on 28 October 1934, and on 25 July 1937 the battleship was launched. All major construction had been completed by October 1939.

Exhibiting the typically elegant flair that had become synonymous with Italian naval vessels, the Littorio class ships were dominated by their three triple 15in main turrets, two forward and one aft. The latter turret would prove to be the most recognisable feature of the Littorio class battleships, as it was located above the quarterdeck. By placing the turret on a slightly higher elevation and lowering the quarterdeck one level, seaplanes parked on the quarterdeck would be protected from the blast of the main armament aircraft on both German and American capital ships were destroyed by 'friendly fire' during wartime engagements. The quarterdeck duly had adequate room for a

single catapult, an aircraft crane and three aircraft. The final design of the Littorio class was a well-balanced ship with good protection, above-average firepower and above-average speed, especially when compared with Royal Navy rivals in-theatre.

However, like their British, American and French contemporaries, these warships exceeded the 35,000-ton displacement limit when Italian designers found it impossible to meet the treaty requirements of adequate armament, speed and protection in a hull of this size. Indeed, by the time Vittorio Veneto entered service

Above: Vittorio Veneto shortly after completion in 1940. Exhibiting the typically elegant flair that was synonymous with Italian naval vessels of the period, the Littorio class were handsome ships. When sea trials began in 1939, the Regia Marina was pleasantly surprised to find that the ship reached in excess of 31kts.

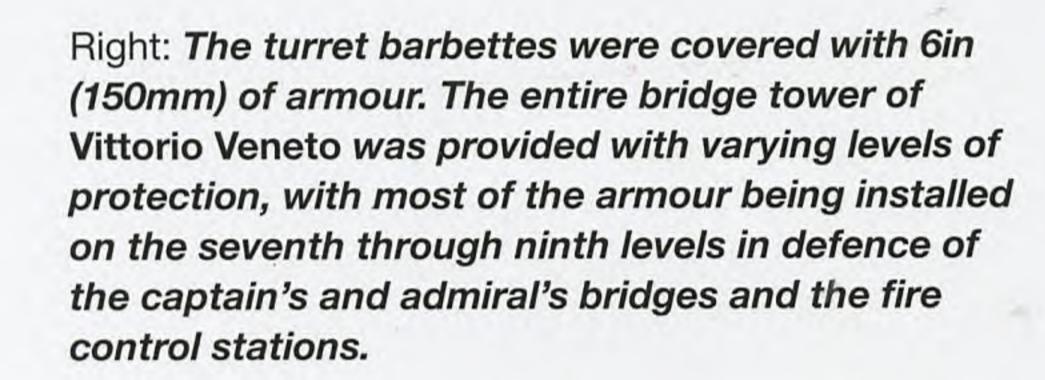
in late April 1940, it weighed 45,963 tons when fully loaded.

Although construction of the vessel had proceeded relatively smoothly, the fitting out process suffered repeated delays because of a series of changes to the design of the ship and a general shortage of heavy

armour plating. Indeed, the battleship spent so long fitting out that Vittorio Veneto had to be towed to the Venice Arsenal on 4 October 1939 to have its hull cleaned of marine fouling that had built up - the drydock in Venice was the only one of its kind in Italy long enough to accommodate a Littorio class battleship. With the cleaning of the hull completed after 13 days out of the water, the drydock was flooded and stability trials commenced. On 19 October Vittorio Veneto sailed under its own power back to Trieste, and sea trials commenced four days later. The vessel's weaponry was also tested

at this time, with the ship being put through its paces until March 1940. Additional fitting out and last-minute repairs were carried out throughout the trials.

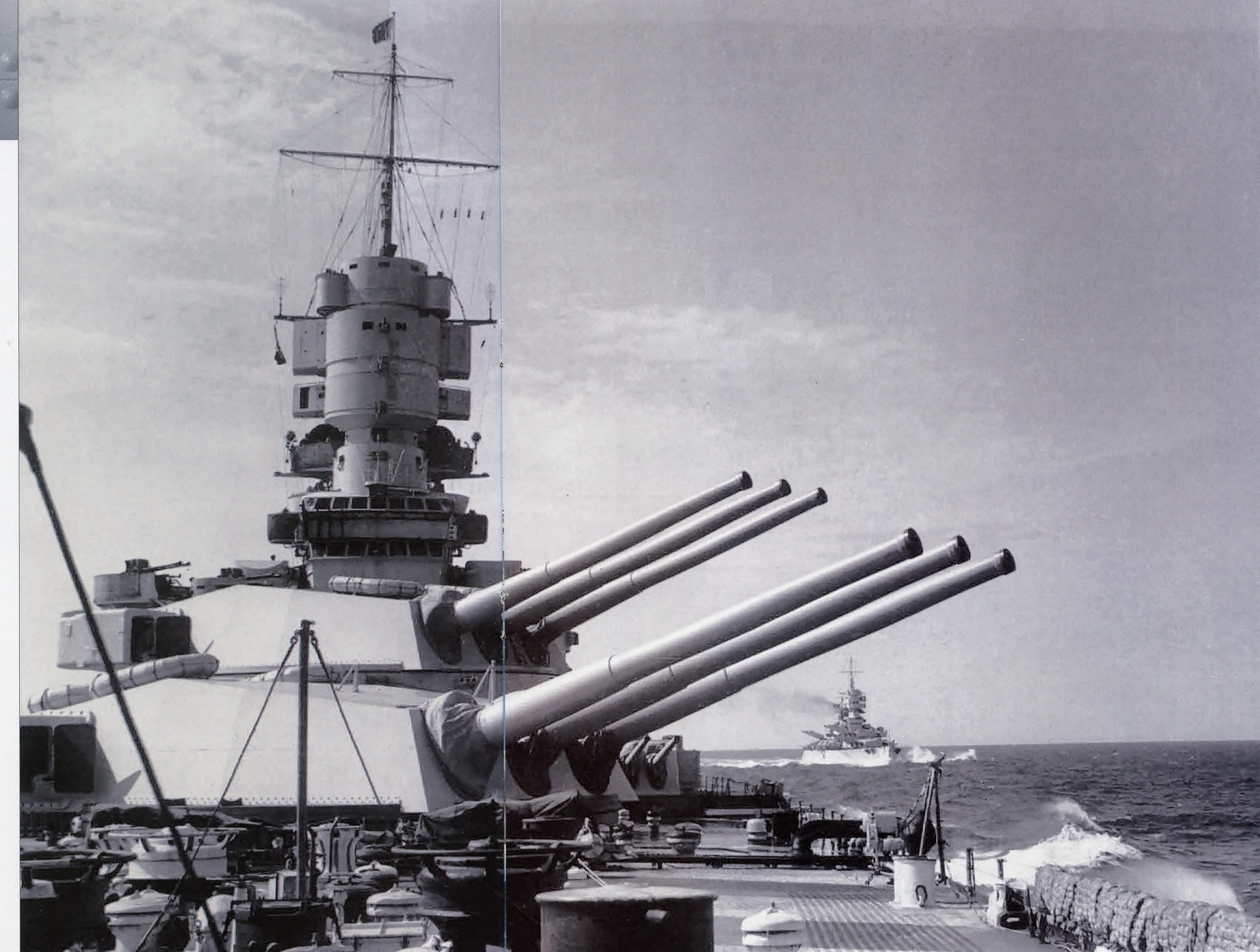
Although delivered to the Regia Marina on 28 April, the ship still lacked its 12 4.7in OTO Model 1938/1939 anti-aircraft mountings amidships at this time. On 1 May Vittorio Veneto sailed for La Spezia for final fitting out, the ship being escorted by the destroyers Emanuele Pessagno and Leone Pancaldo. Five days later the ship commenced the loading of shells for its main and secondary batteries - a task that



took a full two weeks to complete! The OTO anti-aircraft turrets were also installed at this time. On 20 May the battleship was transferred to the 9th Division at Taranto, in southern Italy, being escorted there from La Spezia by the destroyers *Carabiniere* and *Ascari*. Although Italy was on a war footing from 10 June 1940, both *Vittorio Veneto* and *Littorio* were not formally commissioned into the Regia Marina until 2 August.

The primary missions of the Regia Marina from June 1940 would be maintaining communications and a safe supply route with its colonial forces in Libya and the Balkans and control of the central Mediterranean. Its modestlysized battle fleet would be tasked with playing a key role in protecting vulnerable convoys travelling to and from Africa and, more importantly, keeping the Mediterranean closed to Allied shipping. With only two modernised and four brand new battleships immediately available, naval planners within the Regia Marina were initially loath to risk their precious capital ships in action against the British Mediterranean Fleet. When Italy declared war on Britain in June 1940, the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet, under the command of Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, had three battleships (HMS Warspite, HMS Barham and HMS Malaya) at its heart within the 1st Battle Squadron, as well as six cruisers, more than 20 destroyers and the aircraft carrier HMS Glorious.

Senior officers in the Regia Marina knew that Italy's weak maritime industry would struggle to replace losses inflicted on the fleet, especially battleships, hence their reluctance to engage the Royal Navy in battle. The latter had other ideas, however, as the Battle of Taranto would graphically show on 11 November 1940.



#### SPECIFICATIONS

Vittorio Veneto was 780ft (238m) in length, 107.7ft (32.8m) wide and had a maximum draft of 31ft (9.45m). Although designed to weigh in at 35,000 tons, when fully loaded the vessel weighed 45,963 tons. The battleship was manned by a crew of 80 officers and 1,750 enlisted men, which was increased by up to 31 officers when the vessel embarked a command staff whilst serving as a flagship.

#### AIRCRAFT

When it entered service, Vittorio Veneto embarked three IMAM Ro.43 biplane floatplanes for reconnaissance and spotting missions. A 69-ft long catapult dominated the rear quarterdeck. As it became obvious that capital ships urgently needed some sort of generic air defence, the Regia Marina began experimenting in 1942 with the embarkation of the catapultlaunched Reggiane Re.2000 fighter aboard battleships. Being a wheeled aircraft, it could not return to the ship after launch and had to land at a conventional airfield.

#### FIREPOWER

#### Primary armament

The principal armament of Vittorio Veneto was the Italian-designed 15in (381mm) gun - the first weapon of its size to be employed by battleships of the Regia Marina. Possessing impressive powers of penetration over long distances, the main guns were fitted in three triple turrets. Each turret weighed 1,570 tons, and they were heavily protected with face armour of 13.8in (350mm) thickness and side and roof armour of 7.9in (200mm).

#### Secondary armament

A heavy secondary armament was considered necessary and this resulted in the fitting of 12 6in (152mm) 1936 guns in four triple turrets. The guns had a maximum range of 28,150 yards, but could not be fired rapidly as an anti-aircraft gun. It was, however, provided with 252 rounds of high-explosive anti-aircraft shells that could be expended in barrage fire. Long-range antiaircraft protection was provided by 12 4.7in (119.8mm) OTO Model 1938/1939 guns. These were installed six on each beam in single, fully stabilised mounts. Additional anti-aircraft protection was provided by 20 1.45in (37mm) Breda Model 1932/1938 weapons mounted in eight twin and four single mounts. Finally, light anti-aircraft protection was provided by 16 0.79in (20mm) guns.

#### PROTECTION

An elaborate underwater protection system consisted of an angled exterior belt covering the bulged lower hull and two interior longitudinal bulkhead. The semi-circular space between the latter and the outer belt armour was an empty cylinder that was designed to absorb the shock of the explosion associated with a torpedo strike. The cylinder was filled with fuel oil, water, or a mixture of both. The full force of an underwater explosion would hydraulically crush the cylinder, thus dissipating its force.

#### ARMOUR

As the most heavily armoured ships ever built for the Regia Marina, the Littorio-class vessels initially appeared to be adequately protected against battleship gunfire. However, as the main battery weaponry fitted to capital ships of rival navies grew in size, this protection proved to be inferior. The main belt consisted of 11in (280mm) of armour, with a 2.75in (70mm) outer plate. The belt was 12ft 4in (3.75m) deep and extended just 5ft (1.5m) below the waterline. This meant that the main belt was in reality rather thin and shallow. When designed in 1932 the ship had comparatively heavy deck armour, but this proved to be inadequate during wartime. The armour had a maximum thickness of 6.6in (168mm) over the machinery spaces,

but was increased to 8.6in (218mm) over

the magazines.

#### MOBILITY

Eight oil-fired Yarrow boilers were arranged in four boiler rooms. These in turn drove four sets of Belluzzo geared steam turbines and created a maximum of 130,000shp to meet the design speed of 30kts. The ship boasted three rudders, with the main rudder located on the centreline and two auxiliary rudders on either side. These could operate together or independently, and provided the ship with good manoeuvrability.

hull), which created hull vibration, caused flooding of the forecastle and generated heavy spray. The problem was rectified by adding a large flare to the bow and lengthening it by five feet.

Trials revealed a problem with the design

of the bulbous bow (fitted in an effort to

modify the way water flowed around the

Vittorio Veneto - 1:1000 scale

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# ACTION STATIONS

## Fighting in the Med

VITTORIO VENETO sailed with the Italian battle fleet for the first time on 31 August 1940, departing Taranto with four other battleships, 10 cruisers and 34 destroyers when the British Mediterranean Fleet was detected escorting a supply convoy MB3 to Malta. British reconnaissance aircraft in turn found the powerful Regia Marina force and the merchantmen and their naval escorts were able to evade the Italian fleet. This set the pattern for the next two months, as the battleship and its cruiser and destroyer escorts sailed out of Taranto on two more occasions to engage both Gibraltarbased Force H, which headed west into the Atlantic rather than east into the

Mediterranean, and convoy MB5 that was carrying troops to Malta. Neither side got within firing distance on both occasions.

This all changed on the night of
11 November 1940. All six Italian
battleships were at anchor in the naval
base of Taranto, and such a tempting
target was too good for the Royal Navy
to ignore. The British duly put into
motion a plan, codenamed Operation
'Judgement', to attack the Italian battle
fleet with carrier-based aircraft. Taranto
was heavily defended by anti-aircraft guns
and 27 barrage balloons, but critically no
torpedo nets were in place. Furthermore,
the Italians lacked radar, so they had no
warning of the approaching attackers.

Gaining complete tactical surprise, the Fleet Air Arm's 21 Swordfish biplane torpedo-bombers from HMS *Illustrious* executed a skilful night-time attack. Only 12 carried torpedoes (and only 11 were launched), yet despite these paltry numbers, the results were devastating. Three battleships were hit (*Littorio* was struck three times and *Duilio* and *Cavour* twice) and two severely damaged.

Vittorio Veneto escaped being hit, even though it was targeted by Swordfish crew that released their torpedo 500 yards from the battleship, then banked sharply away to make their escape. The torpedo ran past the battleship and struck the already damaged Conte di Cavour, which lay behind it.

Despite having had half of its fleet of battleships rendered inoperable in one attack, the Regia Marina went in search of the Royal Navy on 17 November when it sortied *Vittorio Veneto* and *Giulio Cesare*, escorted by six cruisers and 14 destroyers. Their objective was to intercept Force H from Gibraltar, which had sailed with 12 Hurricanes bound for Malta.

The aircraft were launched early from HMS Argus to avoid contact with the superior Italian fleet, but eight of the 12 fighters were lost. Once again, the Italians returned to base after being unable to locate the British force.

On 26 November the Vittorio Veneto and Giulio Cesare departed Naples to intercept the Operation 'Collar' Malta-bound convoy that had sailed from Gibraltar. Despite the fact that the Italian battle fleet drastically outnumbered the convoy's escort (which

included the carrier HMS *Ark Royal*, the battleship HMS *Ramillies* and the battlecruiser HMS *Renown*), faulty aerial reconnaissance prevented the Italians from closing with the convoy and provided an inflated assessment of British strength.

After the losses at Taranto, the Italian fleet commander was under orders to be extra cautious, and in a brief clash – known as the Battle of Cape Spartivento to the British and the Battle of Cape Teulada to the Italians – cruisers on both sides engaged in an indecisive long-range gunnery duel.

Finally, after evading the torpedoes launched during an air attack by 11
Swordfish from Ark Royal, Vittorio
Veneto joined the fight at 13.00hrs
when it opened fire at 32,000 yards
on several cruisers. The battleship fired
19 salvoes, but scored no hits
– a near miss inflicted slight

damage on HMS *Manchester*. The entire battle had been conducted at long range, with neither side inflicting any serious damage on their opponents.

A series of bombing raids on Naples then prompted the Regia Marina to move Vittoria Veneto and other major warships from Naples to Sardinia on 14 December. They returned to their former home six days later, however, as their presence in Naples posed a threat to British convoys attempting to reach Malta from Alexandria. Having survived another Wellington bomber raid on Naples on the night of 8-9 January 1941, which damaged Giulio Cesare, both battleships were sent to La Spezia. These vessels, along with the repaired Andrea Doria, three cruisers and 8 destroyers attempted to intercept Force H on 8 February, which was on its way to shell Genoa. Neither fleet made contact owing to bad weather.

A Martin Maryland bomber of the RAF's No 431 General Reconnaissance Flight confirms the presence of the Italian fleet at Taranto and comes in for close attention from the battleships Vittorio Veneto (foreground) and Littorio. Painting by Ivan Berryman

## Battle of Cape Matapan

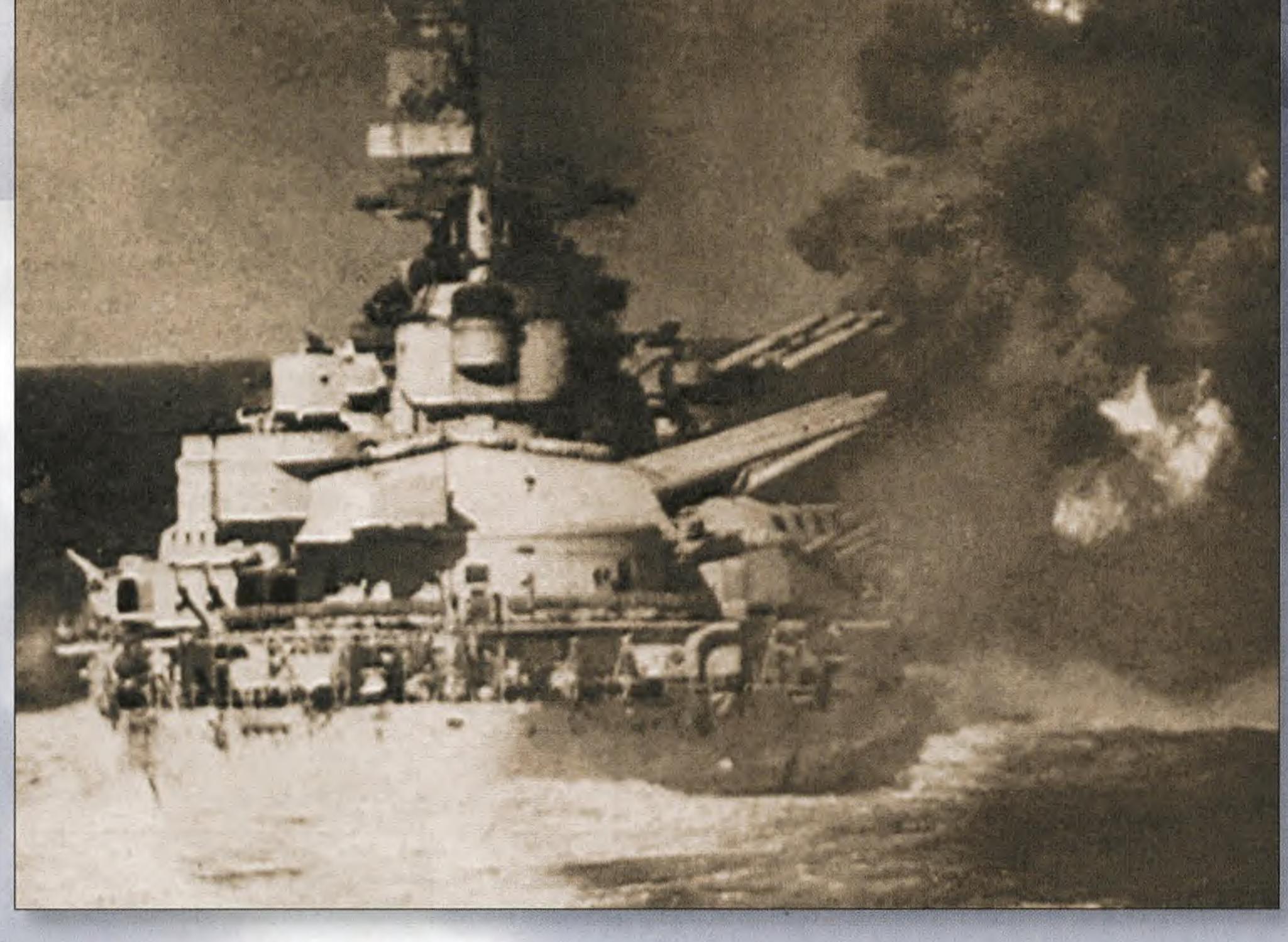
ON 26 MARCH 1941 Vittorio Veneto led a powerful force in a fleet engagement that proved to be the most aggressive Italian naval operation of the entire war. Italy's German ally had been calling for the Regia Marina to disrupt the Royal Navy's support for British forces in Greece, and the Luftwaffe's Fliegerkorps X guaranteed air cover if the Italians engaged the enemy at sea. The result was the Battle of Cape Matapan. Vittorio Veneto sailed with an escort of six heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and 17 destroyers from the 3rd Division. Thanks to effective code breaking by the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park, in Buckinghamshire, the Royal Navy had prior knowledge of Italian intentions and deployed the Mediterranean Fleet, which consisted of three battleships, a carrier, seven light cruisers and 17 destroyers.

The fleets met south of the eastern tip of Crete on 28 March. As the opposing cruisers engaged each other, *Vittorio Veneto* came to full speed and opened fire with its 15in guns at 25,000 yards. The battleship fired 92 shells without success

12 SHIPS OF WAR

- 11 more rounds jammed in the barrels. Before the weight of its salvoes could be fully felt, six Albacore torpedo-bombers from HMS Formidable attacked the battleship at 09.38hrs. No hits were scored, but the Italian ships reversed course. A second wave of Albacores launched almost six hours later conducted a wellexecuted attack at 15.10hrs from both sides of Vittorio Veneto and hit the ship with a single torpedo aft on its port side, which sheared off the port side propeller, damaged the shaft, jammed the port rudder and disabled the aft port pumps. The Albacore that had delivered the torpedo, flown by Lt Cdr J. Dalyell-Stead, commanding officer of 829 Naval Air Squadron, was shot down by anti-aircraft fire from the battleships moments later.

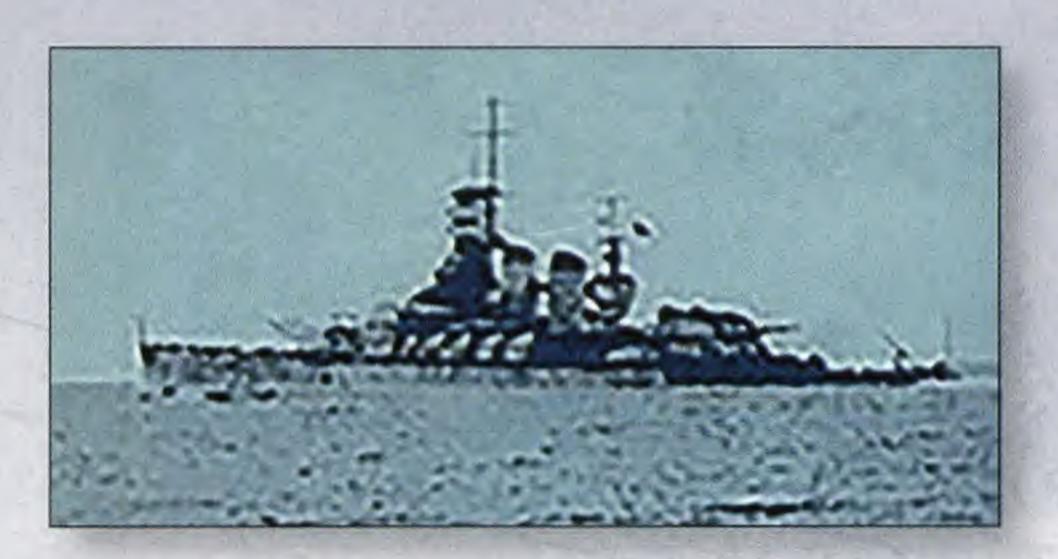
The ship immediately stopped so that repairs could be carried out, damage control parties initially struggling to reduce the flooding as they were only able to use emergency hand pumps. A number of forward and starboard voids were also counter-flooded to reduce a developing 4.5-degree list to port caused by the 4,100 tons of water that had entered the ship. Whilst the vessel was stationary



Above: Firing upon Allied cruisers during the daytime phase of the Battle of Cape Matapan near the Island of Gavdos.

Overall: Even when at full displacement in wartime conditions, the Vittorio Veneto was able to attain an impressive 29kts.

Below: Vittorio Veneto, low in the water after being torpedoed during the Battle of Cape Matapan.

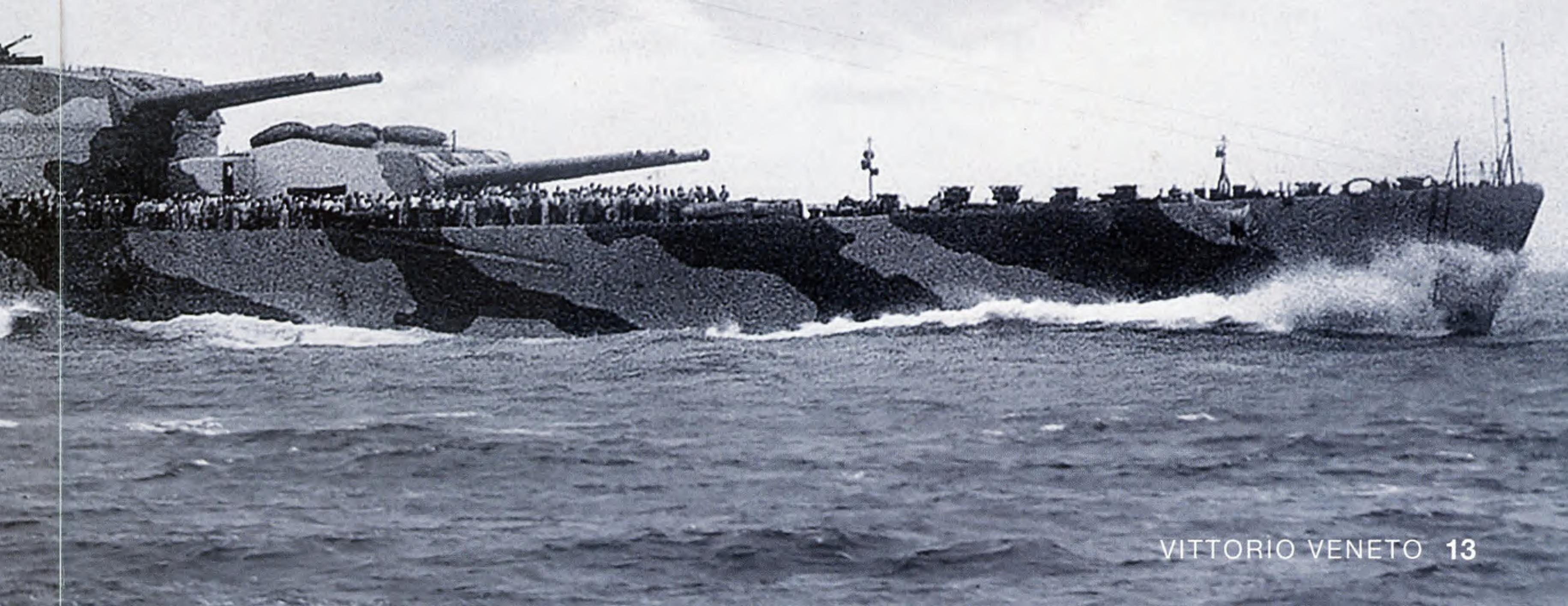


a lone Blenheim dropped a bomb that detonated near the stern of the ship, inflicting further minor damage. Once the flooding had been controlled and engine room personnel had managed to restart the starboard shafts, the battleship slowly got underway again at 10kts with steering being performed via the backup handsteering gear.

A third strike at dusk by six Albacores and two Swordfish found the *Vittorio Veneto* steaming at 20kts. The Italians used searchlights, a smokescreen and a heavy anti-aircraft barrage to protect the ship, which suffered no further damage and returned safely to port. However, the

Italian heavy cruiser *Pola* was damaged and forced to leave the formation. Later that night the British battleships found the badly damaged vessel and its sister-ships *Zara* and *Fiume*, which had been sent back to tow *Pola* home, and sank all three, plus two destroyers, by gunfire. No fewer than 2,303 Italian sailors lost their lives in this one-sided action.

Vittorio Veneto eventually reached Taranto on 29 March, and it remained there being repaired until July. The vessel was finally declared operational once again in August. Between 22-25 August Vittorio Veneto and Littorio led four cruisers and 19 destroyers in an attempt to intercept a British force that had sailed from Gibraltar on a mining mission off Livorno, the Italian battle fleet waiting south of Sardinia for the Royal Navy. Again, no contact was made. A similar story occurred on 27 September when both battleships led five cruisers and 14 destroyers against the Malta convoy Halberd. This time, Force H included the battleships HMS Rodney, HMS Nelson and HMS Prince of Wales within its ranks in an attempt to neutralise the Italian capital ship threat once and for all. Neither side managed to locate each other, although Nelson was hit by a torpedo from a Regia Aeronautica Savoia-Marchetti S.79.



## Bombed and scrapped

THE WORSENING supply situation in North Africa, caused by British interdiction of Axis convoys by submarines and aircraft operating from Malta, forced the Regia Marina to commit its heavy ships to ensure safe passage of its convoys. On 13 December 1941, Vittorio Veneto and Littorio were ordered to provide distant cover for an important convoy to Tripoli. The convoy was soon recalled when a British submarine attack sank two freighters, but as the Italian forces headed back to port through the Strait of Messina on 14 December, Vittorio Veneto was torpedoed by the submarine HMS Urge. One of three torpedoes fired hit the ship on the port side abreast the after turret, the resulting explosion tearing a 43ft-long hole in the hull and causing the vessel to take on more than a one tone of

water, however its Pugliese torpedo defence system proved effective and contained the bulk of the explosion. The battleship listed 3.5 degrees to port, but counter-flooding stabilised the list and the vessel was able to steam under its own power back to Taranto. It remained in port undergoing

repairs until early 1942.

Vittorio Veneto next saw
action during the attempted
interception of the
Operation 'Vigorous'
Malta convoy on 14 June
1942, sailing with
Littorio, four
cruisers and 12

destroyers. The Italian fleet was attacked by RAF Beaufort and Wellington bombers and USAAF B-24 Liberators, although no significant damage was inflicted on either battleship. In the evening *Littorio* was struck by a torpedo from a Beaufort, but the vessel remained operational and the British convoy was forced to return to Alexandria, in Egypt, since the Italian fleet outgunned its Royal Navy escorts.

From then on the Regia Marina was effectively crippled by a shortage of fuel, which halted all anti-convoy operations by the battleships. This meant that the pivotal Operation 'Pedestal' convoy battle in August 1942 was faced only by

Below: Surrounded by anti-torpedo nets, Vittorio Veneto and sister-ship Littorio moored at La Spezia in March 1943. Two months later the battleship was badly damaged during a bombing raid by the USAAF the threat of Italian cruiser opposition — although both the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica inflicted withering losses on the merchantmen involved. As a result of the fuel crisis, only the units of the *Vittorio Veneto* class remained operational, and only enough fuel remained for critical missions. A daylight raid by USAAF heavy bombers on Taranto on 4 December resulted in the fleet being moved to La Spezia, and for the remainder of the war the Regia Marina's battleships were reduced to hiding in port trying to avoid air attack.

On 5 June 1943, one such raid by the USAAF saw *Vittorio Veneto* badly damaged by two large bombs that hit the ship toward its bow – although only one detonated. The bomb actually passed through the ship's hull and exploded beneath it, causing major structural damage. With the dockyard at La Spezia rendered inoperable in the same attack, the battleship had to be sent north to Genoa for repairs to be carried out. It had returned to La Spezia by the time Italy



Above: The Vittorio Veneto ploughs through rough seas with its big guns trained on a target.

signed an armistice with the Allies on 3 September, thus ending the vessel's active participation in the conflict. Six days later, the Regia Marina was ordered to move its warships to an Allied-controlled port and *Vittorio Veneto* and the rest of the battle fleet headed for Malta. En route, German Do 217s armed with Fritz X radiocontrolled bombs targeted *Vittorio Veneto*, *Italia* (formerly *Littorio*) and *Roma* off La Maddalena, Sardinia. Although they missed *Vittorio Veneto*, *Italia* was hit once and *Roma* twice, the latter vessel sinking with the loss of 1,253 crew.

Vittorio Veneto and Italia remained anchored off Malta until 14 September, when they were sailed to Alexandria and then on to the Great Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal. They were both moored here until 6 October 1946, when they were handed back to Italy. Returning to La Spezia, via Augusta, Sicily, on 14 October, Vittorio Veneto was given to Britain as a war prize as part of the Treaty of Peace with Italy that was signed between the two countries on 10 February 1947. Paid off on 3 January 1948, Italy's most active battleship -Vittorio Veneto had participated in 11 offensive operations in total - was scrapped shortly after it was stricken from the naval register on 1 February 1948.

## NEXT ISSUE

# ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE

The 'pocket battleship'

Admiral Graf Spee wreaked havoc on Allied shipping during World War 2. Badly damaged during the Battle of the River Plate, the ship was eventually scuttled by her captain.

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